

Total Instructional Alignment

A New Understanding of an Old Term

By Lisa Carter

Most of us have a clear understanding of what alignment means when it comes to our cars. When a car's tires are not properly aligned, it can negatively impact the performance of the entire vehicle. So how, then, does the term *alignment* translate into educational practice?

Most professionals have a common language with which they communicate. For example, doctors use complex medical terminology and lawyers talk about their profession using specific legal terms. This common language allows these professionals to communicate quickly and precisely about their work and helps avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation. For whatever reason, educators have yet to develop a universally accepted common language when it comes to the teaching and learning process. The result is confusion about the terms we use and the ideas they describe. The term *alignment* is one such example.

We have all heard of instructional alignment—it is nothing new to most educators. The term entered our educational jargon over a decade ago with the onset of the standards movement. For the most part, the term *alignment* was used to describe the idea of teaching what is being tested. Now the term is used more frequently to describe other aspects of the instructional program. Some educators might think of alignment as it relates to pacing guides, curriculum maps, and quarterly benchmarking exams. Others might describe alignment as ensuring that the knowledge, concepts, and skills students are learning are sequential and build in complexity from one grade level or course to the next. With no common language through which to communicate, it is understandable why many educators have varying ideas about what alignment means and what it looks like. So as educators, how do we define and develop a universal understanding of such a complex idea?

I would like to broaden, and at the same time simplify, the way educators think when it comes to alignment in education. Simply stated, true alignment is the creation of a new educational system that totally aligns to the learning needs of individual students. I call this process Total Instructional Alignment. Now this sounds simple enough, but most educators agree that it is a very complex idea.

Changing an antiquated system that requires students to align to the way it operates and creating in its place a flexible, diagnostic-prescriptive system that ensures learning and provides equal, rigorous learning opportunities for all students is no easy task. It requires attention to three important domains of the alignment process: systemic alignment; alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessment; and alignment of instructional practices in every classroom. Like a car, when one part of the system is not aligned, the performance of the entire system is affected.

Education is the very cornerstone of our democracy. We can no longer afford to leave children behind or to slow down some students while others catch up. The creation of a rigorous educational system, aligned to meet the instructional needs of all students is the only answer. I truly believe the term *alignment* will now take on a whole new meaning for educators. It is one of the most important educational terms on which we must agree and take immediate action. It will require imagination and courageous action on the part of school leaders and total involvement and commitment on behalf of teachers, students, parents, and the community. But it can be done, and we owe our students nothing less.